

# Buying Time in Lithuania

*His Choices Severely Limited, Gorbachev Is Forced to Sell the Virtues of Federation*

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MOSCOW, Jan. 12 — Barnstorming across Lithuania this week, President Mikhail S. Gorbachev has undertaken the most desperate diplomatic endeavor of his career: a campaign to preserve the integrity of the Soviet Union by personal persuasion.

**News  
Analysis**

Facing a Lithuanian separatist movement that could present him with a test in a matter of months, Mr. Gorbachev is appealing for time to broker the creation of a new, freer Soviet federation in which, he promises, Lithuanians and other independence-minded republics would have real economic and political liberty while remaining at least nominally tied to Moscow.

At each stop in the streets and auditoriums of the Baltic republic, Mr. Gorbachev has encountered the polite but glacial determination of the Lithuanians, who doubt that Mr. Gorbachev can deliver on that promise. Many are already treating him as the leader of a friendly but foreign country.

## Few Options for Gorbachev

Mr. Gorbachev is jawboning his way through Lithuania — his encounters with the defiant populace played out to incredulous television audiences across the country — because he has apparently accepted that he has no other attractive options for preventing a first, precedent-setting breach in the union.

What Mr. Gorbachev is attempting to achieve by exhortation, any previous Soviet leader would almost surely have handled with brute force.

But forcible repression of the peaceful Lithuanian independence drive would be a devastating setback for Mr.

Gorbachev's foreign and domestic policies, and would probably be met with massive civil disobedience.

Even a top conservative of the Communist Party Politburo, Yegor K. Ligachev, has ruled out the use of force to contain the errant Lithuanians, telling a Swedish newspaper this week that "Tanks cannot solve such problems."

Indeed, since troops wielding sharp-

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Agence France-Presse

Mikhail S. Gorbachev visiting a collective farm in Lithuania.



Raisa Gorbachev touring a collective farm in Lithuania. She accompanied her husband on his visit, part of a diplomatic campaign to appeal for time to broker the creation of a new, freer Soviet federation.

## News Analysis

# Gorbachev in Lithuania: Buying Time

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ened shovels killed a score of nationalist demonstrators last year in Soviet Georgia, the popular revulsion for domestic use of military power has grown so intense that the leadership must have some doubts about whether army draftees would follow any orders to suppress the Lithuanian uprising.

"It's clearer and clearer in my judgment that they are not going to use force," a Western diplomat said today, reflecting the prevailing view in Moscow and Lithuania.

### Results of Economic Threats

Mr. Gorbachev and others in his top-level delegation have talked of a new federal law setting potentially daunting conditions for a republic to secede. But whatever legal hurdles Moscow tosses in the way, the Lithuanians are likely to ignore them.

The republic's Parliament has already declared that its own laws take precedence over decisions made in Moscow, and most Lithuanians believe their incorporation into the union, which took place after Stalin and Hitler concluded a secret pact, was illegal.

Nor do Lithuanians seem much impressed by Moscow's economic leverage. The republic depends on subsidized Soviet oil and steel, as Mr. Gorbachev has reminded them at every stop. But Lithuanians long ago steeled themselves, at least theoretically, to a period of economic hardship.

Yuri D. Maslyukov, chairman of the Soviet state planning agency and a member of the Politburo, conceded in a meeting with Lithuanian factory workers this week that economic threats only generate resentment.

"I have had a chance to observe how residents of the republic react with irritation to outside speculation about how much their freedom will cost them in rubles or in convertible currency," he said. "And obviously, they are right. It is for them to determine their own fate."

Mr. Gorbachev's worst nightmare goes something like this:

In their local elections, scheduled for Feb. 24, Lithuanians elect a new parliament dominated by fervent nationalists. The legislators convene a few weeks later and vote to hold a referendum on secession.

Under a law approved in the republic in November, a simple majority of eligible voters would be required for passage of a referendum. Few doubt that if such a plebiscite were put on a ballot today, it would pass comfortably.

Other republics, beginning with Lithuania's restive Baltic neighbors, Estonia and Latvia, soon join the exodus, or use the threat of secession to demand concessions from Moscow — territorial claims, exemption from military serv-

Most Lithuanians, while bent on independence, speak of a timetable of years, rather than months, for disengaging from the union.

### Gorbachev's Target Audiences

Even if Lithuania, where people of Lithuanian stock are 80 percent of the population, votes to secede, separatists expect a harder time mustering a majority in Estonia, where 40 percent of the population is non-Estonian, and Latvia, where Latvians are outnumbered by Russians and others.

Mr. Gorbachev's performance in Lithuania this week is directed to different audiences.

First, he hopes to postpone a secession move by underscoring the economic and political chaos that would ensue, and by imploring Lithuanians to test their greater autonomy within a promised new federation.

"Do you know what a federation is?" Mr. Gorbachev demanded in a meeting Thursday with Lithuanian intellectuals. "How could you know? You have never lived in one."

In his appeal to the Lithuanians, Mr. Gorbachev can expect lobbying help from Russian liberals, who fear that the exodus of the Baltic republics would strengthen the hands of Kremlin conservatives and threaten the end of Mr. Gorbachev's experiment in democracy.

He also hopes that his bid for patience will be endorsed by prominent Lithuanians who have kept their credibility by keeping their distance from Moscow — including Algirdas Brazauskas, the shrewd Lithuanian Communist Party leader, who led the Lithuanian Communists in declaring independence from the central party last month. Mr. Gorbachev is ostensibly in Lithuania to repair that rift, although he now seems to accept it as a fait accompli.

If all else fails, at least after this week Mr. Gorbachev can tell the country he has done everything in his power to prevent the disintegration of the union.

## Using personal appeal in an effort to woo back the Baltics.

ice, budget-busting economic investments.

Moscow's problems would further embolden nationalists in Azerbaijan, where ethnic violence was reported in at least three regions today.

The Kremlin, the dire scenario goes, would be swamped by a flood of people of Russian heritage fleeing home from breakaway republics, demanding compensation and indignation toward the permissive Soviet leader who lost Lithuania.

Mr. Gorbachev and his program of political and economic change would be hard pressed to survive the breakup of the union.

In practice, the disintegration of the Soviet Union is probably not quite so imminent.